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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a case study of a young writer, a girl aged between 9 and 10 over the 6-month period analyzed. The writer accessed KidPub, a World Wide Web site that accepts stories submitted by or on behalf of children and young people under the age of 16 and publishes them, giving each story its own Web page. With the help of a mentor, the writer published a story via this Web site. The paper discusses the process of engaging the writer through tracking how many times her story was read, as well as reading and responding to reader correspondence. Examples of e-mail correspondence are included. (DLS)

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# Real Audiences-Worldwide: A Case Study of the Impact of WWW Publication on a Child Writer's Development

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For many years, theoretical and practical work on the development of children's writing has stressed the importance of devising tasks which require children to write for real audiences for real purposes, as opposed to textbook exercises completed for teachers. In the world of paper-based communication, this has emphasized the importance of publishing as a concept. Publishing is taken to include the processes of drafting and redrafting for the needs of the identified audience, usually involving the creation of an artefact in some way resembling a commercially produced book, often with a hard cover. Typical examples have been the production of a story by an older child for a younger audience, or a story or information book intended for display or sale to a school-based, parental or wider community audience. At a theoretical level, the key features of publication by child writers for real audiences are, firstly, a shift from a one-to-one mode of communication to the one-to-many mode typical of real-world publication. Secondly, there is a strong focus on emulating the presentational features of commercial or other adult publication, notably the bound book format. The advent of laser-printed desktop publishing and inexpensive colour copying facilities has added to the opportunities for child authors to emulate commercially produced "real books", though there has been relatively little discussion of this in the literature.

Sites now exist on the WWW which specialize in the electronic publication of writings, art and photographic work by children. Many hundreds of children worldwide are having their written work published on them. Little has so far been published on the impact of these facilities on the child writers who use them. Most work so far published on computers and children's writing has focused on computer-originated communication, particularly the opportunities and constraints offered by word-processing and desktop publication.

The opening up of e-mail facilities for use by children has also been the subject of some analytic work. For the most part, the documented use of e-mail by children has been in the context of school-based projects. These have typically involved one-to-one or many-to-one dialoguing exchanges. Examples have been projects involving classes of children exchanging information about a shared topic, or a single class consulting an expert, or sometimes a simulated external event to which the children respond, such as messages apparently arriving on their screens from visitors from other planets .

The advent of WWW as a medium for children's publication opens up a venue for real world publication of a new order. WWW publication most readily replicates for child authors both the one-to-many locus of the adult published author, and in addition allows for the one-to-one medium of individual mail responses, given the facilities offered by WWW sites for children of hyperlinked facilities for direct email response by readers.

This discussion focuses on a case study of one writer, S, a girl aged between nine and ten over the period of six months analysed. The developments analysed in this paper took place in her school and mainly in her home. S's school had no online facilities on its computers for pupil use, and only crude

IR019183

word-processing facilities with dot matrix output, which were in any case rarely used.

In the spring of 1995 her mother acquired for the first time a multimedia computer with facilities to access WWW and email. Acting as mentor for her daughter's induction into computer mediated communication, she sought to interest her daughter in the newly acquired medium. Initially a talented but very reluctant writer, and a very advanced and voracious reader of books, S initially showed little interest in WWW, although she was shown a number of sites related to children's interests over a period of several months. She began to show interest in a number of school and dedicated sites publishing children's writing and artwork after a period of some three months of occasionally being shown various sites selected by her mother, and having opportunities to follow links to these and other sites. At no time did she show any interest in email, although the possibility of acquiring "keypals", analogous to penpals, was offered to her.

One of the sites in which she showed a particular interest was the US-based KidPub site. This site accepts all stories submitted by or on behalf of children and young people under the age of 16 and publishes them, each text being given its own Web page. Each text carries the title and name of the author, and, where submitted, a photograph of the author. At the end of the text appear any details submitted about the authors, such as age, place of residence, hobbies, etc. Where available, a link to the email address of the author is provided. Finally, at the end of the Web page, the number of times the story has been accessed is given, in the format "This story has been read n times". Visitors accessing the KidPub site are offered lists of all texts available, divided into "Newest stories" and stories previously submitted. These are organized into roughly monthly volumes. The individual stories are listed as a series of links giving only title, name and age of author and place of residence, usually by hometown and state or country. Further choices offered include a section devoted to stories submitted by schools, as well as opportunities to submit stories direct via email response links. KidPub is a popular site, receiving some hundreds of accesses per day. It is also featured as a link on a number of compendium sites listing links of interest to children.

S showed interest in visiting the site, but was not responsive to being invited to compose a story specifically for it, or initially to having one of her existing stories transcribed and submitted. Her interests when browsing the site were invariably to look at the current day's stories, rather than at previous volumes. She was intrigued by the counter facilities, showing interest in how many times a story had been read. She tended to choose to read stories submitted by compatriots, or by other girls of her own age or slightly older, otherwise choosing stories on the basis of being interested by their titles. However, some four months after first visiting KidPub, S readily agreed to a story she had written in an exercise book for her teacher at school being transcribed by her mentor and submitted by email for publication. It was a story of which she was proud, and it had been to some degree influenced by Russell Hoban's classic "The Mouse and His Child" which she had read in the previous fortnight. She dictated an "about the author" endpiece specifically for publication on the site, but otherwise did not wish to revise or redraft the story for WWW publication. In composing this endpiece, she was strongly influenced by similar endpieces she had previously written for handwritten and desktop published versions of stories written in earlier years.

S's writing mentor was doubtful that WWW publication would have any positive effect in making her less of a reluctant writer, although this was the purpose of seeking to involve her in publishing on the Web. Having noticed the degree of interest S had shown in the number of readers accessing individual stories, her writing mentor hypothesized that she would be positively motivated by having a large number of readers access her story. Action was taken by the mentor to publicize the URL for her story once online by circulating details to closed email groups of which she was a member. In this way, the mentor took on another of the roles associated with real world publishing, that of publicizing the publication. Unlike a real world editorial publicist, however, S's mentor did not share with S that she had taken the action,

S was asked to predict the number of readers who would access her story on its first day online. Having seen from her own readings of other children's stories on KidPub that a typical number of readers on the first day would be of the order of 4-12, S predicted that there would be ten or eleven. By the end of the first day, 39 accesses had been logged, to S's surprise and evident delight. Over the next days, S was

intensely interested in visiting and revisiting her new story Website, in some part to enjoy the sight of her story in its professionally produced Web format, but primarily in order to see how many more readers had read her story (the number had risen to over 100 within one week). Thus in this first stage, S's interest in the publication was centred on predicting and tracking the number of readers logged at the site from day to day. This initial phase of interest was thus crucially tied to the availability of an onscreen logging facility onsite.

An unpredictedly large number of reader responses to the story began to arrive by email, posing a problem for the child author and her writing mentor. This is a previously unconsidered aspect of the outcomes of encouraging children to write for real audiences. In real world commercial publishing in print, only the most outstandingly successful authors receive substantial responses from readers in the form of direct mail. A world class author selling in the hundreds of thousands of print copies may receive some dozens of letters per week, The analogous hand made and desktop published books produced by children are highly unlikely to receive written responses, since the audiences for the most part are in direct contact with the writers. But with WWW, any given publication is instantly available to many millions of individuals worldwide. Many-to-one communication from otherwise unknown readers to a writer is greatly facilitated by the direct email link to the individual author which sites such as KidPub carry. It is the easiest of tasks to send an instant written response to the author.

Ten email responses to S's story arrived within the first two days of its publication, and within a month over twenty had been received, some by surface mail. Responses came mainly from the US, but also from Canada, France, England and Australia. Most of the messages congratulated the writer on her story and also made some sort of request which presumed that she would reply.

The publication of the story on WWW was visibly having the desired effect of making S feel very positive about her writing and intrigued and interested by others' responses to it. She was almost as interested in the range of places her audience was writing from as she was in the number of daily accesses to her story Webpage. However, her mentor's intention of helping S become a less reluctant writer was compromised by the prospect of successful publication bringing with it the potentially daunting task of drafting large numbers of responses.

Another previously undiscussed facet of the commercial publishing metaphor provided an unexpectedly fruitful solution. The mentor explained to S that very successful authors have secretaries who help them answer the letters they receive from readers. With S's agreement, the mentor took on this role, helping S look through each printed out email in turn, and encouraging S to identify specific requests for information or response. S then dictated a response which was transcribed and emailed by the mentor.

S had had little experience of writing letters for either "real" audiences or in classroom exercises, beyond a small number of thank you letters and holiday postcards. She initially dictated very brief answers to her email correspondence, generating a three stage of message-answer-final message, of which the following was typical

Hi,

I enjoyed reading your story. I will tell it to my 4 year old son

tonight at bedtime. I have a daughter, who is 11, a little older than

you and we live in Philadelphia. Keep writing stories. It is fun to

pass them on. Lucas calls it "stories from your mind"....the best kind.

Thanks for sharing your story with us.

Dear -

Thank you for writing to me. I am glad to hear you like the story. I hope

your son likes it. Could you email me back to say if he did?

S

Hi,

Lucas liked your story but said it was "too short". This is probably because

he likes "long" bedtime stories so he can stay up later.

At the end he said that the gecko and mouse had become friends. He especially

liked that part.

Keep up your writing!

However, as S dictated each response, she visibly developed increasing control of the letter form, and began to engage in a much greater level of interactive dialogue. This is the last email exchange of the first sequence of eight emails which she dictated:

S,

I've just read your story on en-garde.com/kidpub

and it was a lot of fun. I was also really scared

when I got to the part about the rattlesnake! Really!

I hate snakes!

I'm glad the story ended the way it did! Can you tell me

what a fruiting tree is? Is it a tree with fruits? Or a

special tree? I love plants and trees and I don't know this

one. What does it look like?

My cat, Whisky, says hello too! She often sits on my lap

when I'm at the computer. Do your cats do that too?

Writing to you from France,

All the best,

L

Dear L

Thank you for writing me such a nice email.

I'm glad you found the story fun. You say you hate snakes. Why do you

hate them? I actually quite like snakes.

Yes, a fruiting tree is a tree with fruits. Try to imagine a fig tree with figs.

I like the sound of your cat. Only one of our cats is very interested in computers. He is the male cat. His name is Pashta. Last night, when we were looking at emails, Pashta jumped on our shoulders, slid onto my mum's lap and started messing up the computer by pressing these different buttons. Then he settled down and stared at the screen.

Where in France do you live? We have been to the Charente. We have also been to Brittany. You may not be familiar with them, but they are both very beautiful.

best wishes to you and your cat.

S

Dear S,

And thank you for such a nice email, too!

You asked why I hate snakes -- simply I'm afraid of them! Where I grew up there were Rattlesnakes and in Florida other poisonous snakes. I'd just as soon stay away from them!

The fruiting tree is such a nice expression. We have lots of trees in our garden, but only apple and pears. I'm not sure I've ever seen a fig tree -- maybe in Tunisia or Morocco... don't remember!

Ah, my dear cat. Whisky is a black cat but a good luck cat. She's my cyberkitty! Sounds like Pashta and Whisky would be good friends. Whisky usually jumps over the keyboard -- I haven't been able to teach her to type yet.

I live in a village called Boullay les Troux which is 35 kms southwest of Paris. I've been to Brittany, but don't know the Charente region. France is a beautiful country almost every place you visit.

Best of luck with your writing and publishing on the web.

Thanks for taking the time to write and hello to your cats from mine!

L

After the first sequence of eight emails, S's time was taken up with other demands. It was almost a month before she and her writing mentor were able to deal with the next batch, making some nineteen responses in total. On both the first batch and the second batch, she and the mentor read through each email and then S dictated her response before proceeding to the next email. On the second round, S initially reverted to the more brief and formal answers of her first few email responses, again showing development of more elaborated interactive replies as she dictated successive answers.

S now began to think of pieces she was writing at school as potentially being suitable for a worldwide audience via WWW. However, she moved house, involving a change of school, and it was two months before she had available a further piece which she wanted published via KidPub. This was a poem on a subject, friendship, chosen by her teacher and composed in writing at school. The poem was transcribed and emailed to the KidPub site by her mentor, who again circulated details via email lists.

S again showed the same pattern of interest as before, initially focussing on the number of accesses to the Webpage with the poem on it, but also now asking if there were emails for her. The number of emails was not as high as for her previous story, but it was again worldwide, with responses coming from Australia and Singapore as well as the countries previously referred to. The same pattern was again observed as S dictated to her mentor responses to her readers. Her first dictated response was to L, her correspondent of the first exchange, who sent her a lengthy email praising various aspects of the poem and asking her if she would like her poem to be chosen as a site of the month for the Web page which L maintained, which is a list of resources for teachers of English as a Foreign Language. S's response was much more limited than her first email to L:

Dear L

Thank you very much for writing to me again.

I am glad you like my poem so much. Thank you for telling me about the typing error. It has now been corrected.

I would be happy for you to put me on your Editor's choice for March 1996.

Sorry this took so long to get to you.

best wishes for you and your computer.

S

However, S's next response, dictated within half an hour of the previous response, showed her as having rapidly retrieved the level of skill and interactivity shown by the last response of her first sequence, and gone well beyond it:

Dear R

Thank you very much for writing to me about my poem.

KidPub is a Website where children of any age can put any story or poem on an actual page of their own. I am not sure if someone of your age could put a story or poem on KidPub, but perhaps your grandaughters and great-neice would like to put some of their stories on KidPub. Please do not say that you are hopeless with computers. You are probably just not used to using them, and you will learn which buttons to press, when and where.

I'm also very glad that you like my poem and story. I might be going to write more. I am thinking of setting up my own home page, with all my stories and pictures on it.

best wishes to you, your two grandaughters, your great niece and your computer.

love from

S

By this stage, then, S sees herself as an author who makes choices, and who is potentially someone who can set up her own home page, which will include all her writings and artwork. This represents a decisive change in her self image, and her mastery of the letter form also shows that she has made major gains in terms of her ability to handle the epistolary dialogue, including her own decisions on the selection of which elements in her correspondents' texts she responds to, and in what order. She clearly seeks to take control of the dialogue, reassuring this senior adult about her self doubts about her computer skills.

The very positive developments in S's view of herself as a writer and in her skills and abilities to plan future writing accomplishments have been accomplished very substantially through the agency of a mentor who was able to devise strategies which ensured that the process of getting stories published and responding to readers was experienced positively by S.

The KidPub site design, with its use of page counters, individual Web pages and individual email response links has also been crucial in enabling S to publish and engage with a worldwide audience. Both S's mentor and KidPub have adopted strategies which leave decisions about design, presentation and the mechanics of Web site creation in the hands of adults; this is essentially an exercise in computer mediated communication rather than in the use of Web design and skills (such as html coding) by children themselves. KidPub is unusual in having few images on its Website, and in adopting a relatively conservative approach compared with many sites directed at children, which frequently image-led, and adopt a style of high-colour, and quirky graphic devices typical of comic book design. Such sites frequently are slow to load because of the degree of graphic complexity they contain. S's response suggests that the professional, adult-looking appearances of KidPub's Web pages is partly what gives them their appeal to the children who publish on them. However, as she begins to envisage herself as owning and generating her own home page, her model is not so much KidPub as other children's Web pages. Most of the latter are equally the outcome of adult rather than child design and control, which is hardly surprising given the present complexity of html production. However, new software being developed by the major commercial software producers is likely to make Web page design by children muchmore of a reality. It remains to be seen whether such producers can resist the easy and obvious solutions of modelling design for children's Web page on the cut-and-paste comic book model, and offer a wider range of approaches which are easy to use for children but which are closer to those of real world publication for adults.

Teachers are still barely able to make available to children the best of desktop publishing and wordprocessing facilities as they now exist. The advent of WWW offers children previously undreamt of access to real audiences worldwide. Teaching of design and communication facilities for Web use is not as yet on the agenda of writing courses for children. It is time for that agenda to be reconsidered.